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271.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED

IN THE

PARISH CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, DEPTFORD;

ON

Monday the 6th of June, 1814,

BEFORE THE HONOURABLE

Corporation of Trinity Brethren.

BY

THE REV. ROBERT STEVENS, A. M.

ONE OF THE PREACHERS IN THE ASYLUM AND MAGDALEN CHAPELS,

AND LECTURER OF ST. MARGARET'S WESTMINSTER.

London:

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TO THE

MOST NOBLE THE MARQUIS CAMDEN,

MASTER;

TO

JOSEPH COTTON, ESQ.

DEPUTY MASTER;

AND TO THE REST OF THE RIGHT HONOURABLE AND HONOURABLE

ELDER BRETHREN

OF THE

Ancient Corporation of the Trinity House,

This Sermon,

PREACHED AND PRINTED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS

MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY

THEIR MOST OBEDIENT AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,

ROBERT STEVENS.

16, ALFRED PLACE,
June 21, 1814.

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A

SERMON.

JOB XII. 9, 10.

WHO KNOWETH NOT IN ALL THESE THAT THE HAND OF THE LORD HATH WROUGHT THIS? IN WHOSE HAND IS THE SOUL OF EVERY LIVING THING, AND THE BREATH OF ALL MANKIND.

THAT there is a God is the fundamental doctrine of true Religion. Some men, however, who acknowledge the first principle of faith, entertain considerable doubts, and indulge many vain fancies, respecting the Providence of God. Not being able to satisfy their minds upon several points, such as, how a Being, so clothed with majesty and glory, can condescend to take an interest in the comparatively insignificant things of this world?—why he permits

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so much natural and moral evil to exist, earthquakes to tear up the foundations of the earth, storms to wreck the labours and the hopes of man, beasts to prowl about for prey, wars and tumults to disturb the happiness and welfare of nations, and strifes, animosities, and trespasses to inflame the passions, and griefs and afflictions to make miserable the hearts of his creatures?—and why, if he hates vice and loves virtue, he allows the wicked to prosper in their iniquity, and the good to suffer often for righteousness' sake?—not being able, I say, to satisfy their minds on these points, they try to account for circumstances and events upon the principle of fate or chance; thereby, while they confess the existence of a Supreme Being, calling in question his general, and more especially, his particular Providence.

But they, who have imbibed the true spirit of piety, are convinced, that he presides over the world which he has made, not as a mere unconcerned spectator of natural contingencies and moral chances, but as an active and watchful Governor,

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who pervades with his presence every the minutest particle of Creation, gives energy, operation, and continuance to every work of his hands according to his good pleasure, and suffers no act to be performed, no agency to be carried on, no occurrence to take place, without his knowledge and permission. Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without our Father; not a thought arises in our hearts, * "but he knoweth it altogether." "In his hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind." He clothes the grass of the field, feeds the fowls of the air, supplies us with food and raiment, preserves us from innumerable dangers, and sends his Angels † "to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."

Let the objector complain of the existence of evil; let him look at the convulsions, disorders, and decays of nature, and at the mischiefs and mi-

* Ps. cxxxix. 4. † Heb. i. 14.

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series which man of himself occasions, and to which humanity is subject, and draw thence his doubts and cavils with respect to the directing and controlling Providence of God. We envy him neither his notions nor his feelings. Both, we are persuaded, are founded on error, and have grown up in his breast through ignorance of the original cause that brought evil into the world. *"God," we assert, "is not the Author of Confusion." Every work, as it first came out of his hands, was good, and would have remained so, had not man, by reason of his transgression, cast upon it the stain of impurity and corruption. We hear not the noise of the thunder, nor the raging of the tempest; we see not the ruins of the lightning, nor the ravages of the pestilence; we witness no scenes of sorrow, no circumstances of pain, no sudden wrecks of happiness or of life, but we discover the

* 1 Cor. xiv. 33.

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most convincing proofs of the Fall and Punishment of Man. But God, when he inflicted the penalty of transgression, did not withdraw his Providence. He still considers us as his children, still provides for our wants, is still exerting all his gracious Attributes, as far as his justice and truth will permit, in bringing good out of evil, and in remedying the mischiefs, which the enmity of Satan, and the wickedness of man, are continually spreading around.

In all the minor concerns of human life, and in all the private interests of individual man, his Providence is actively and incessantly engaged. But in the important and complicated affairs of nations it is more conspicuously displayed. In the extraordinary events that take place in the world, in the elevation of one people to greatness and prosperity, in the depression of another into insignificance and calamity, in the intestine commotions that light up in the land the flame of discord, and in the mad and mighty conflicts of contend-

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ing foes, we are struck, in a more than usual degree, with the power and interference of a superintending Deity, and are taught to feel, with a more than usual force, the awful conviction, that, * "doubtless, there is a God that judgeth the earth."

Was it fate, was it chance, that raised Babylon to the summit of glory, and gave might and dominion unto Egypt? Was it fate, was it chance, that caused the golden city to cease, and made the kingdom of Pharaoh the basest upon earth? Was it mere accident that delivered Israel out of Egypt, and brought the sojourners in the wilderness to the heritage of the goodly land? And was it, as some foolishly assert, nothing else, but a fortuitous concurrence of circumstances, that has produced the late events, which have caused such astonishment, and effected such changes, in the world? No. It was the hand of an over-ruling Providence that has wrought this; of that Almighty

* Ps. lviii. 10.

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Being, who stretches out his arm to save or destroy, to raise up or cast down, as his mercy prompts, or his justice demands. When nations serve him faithfully, he is their God, their Protector. He causes them to reign and prosper. He turns from them the fury of the oppressor, brings to nought the designs of the ungodly, puts an end to the wild dreams of proud ambition, and suffers no deadly thing to hurt the people of his love. But when they forsake his testimonies, and pay adoration to the idols of sin, he withdraws the power of his heavenly protection, and leaves them to eat in sorrow and in pain the fruit of their doings. He pours out his judgments upon them, as an overwhelming flood. He causes their pride to bow down its head to the dust, casts a blight over all their joys, fills their homes and hearts with bitter lamentations, and gives occasion to their enemies to make songs upon their misery. *"Blessed," therefore,

* Ps. cxliv. 15.

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"are the people who have the Lord for their God."

That this country has been in an especial manner favoured by his Providence, no one, I trust, will deny. We are not to consider this Providence as visible only in his preserving us from the sword of the enemy, and in his giving us the victory in the day of battle. We are to view its evidences also in all those acts of human wisdom, which tend to national prosperity, and in all those noble and benevolent Institutions, which unite private benefit with public welfare.

When legislators enact laws in the spirit of religion, assured, that excellence in design, and utility in operation, proceed from God alone;—and when, in the spirit of charity, they cause their grand projects of national benefit to be productive of comfort and blessing to the individual instruments, that contribute to carrry them into effect, there is every reason to hope, that their works receive the approbation of the Almighty, and will continue to after-ages monuments of their wisdom and of his protection.

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The union of wise counsel and Christian benevolence in the Establishment, which is this day the object of our commendation, is most conspicuous; and the advantages which have accrued to the nation at large, and to individuals in particular, through ages of prosperity, and during many years of threatening peril, prove most forcibly, that it has been upheld and preserved by the good Providence of God. Works of benefit to his creatures, being well-pleasing to their Creator, are always his peculiar care. He causes them not only to flourish, to continue, and to be perpetuated, but also to become the means of security in the hour of danger.

A particular explanation of the nature of your Establishment, and of the duties and offices of those who superintend and execute its purposes, would be superfluous. I proceed, therefore, to make some observations calculated to illustrate its wisdom and its usefulness.

Situated, as we are, upon the globe, we must necessarily be a maritime people; and in order to

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carry on a commerce with other nations, and thereby open to ourselves sources of wealth and strength, a certain proportion of our population must *" occupy their business in great waters." These, in their numerous voyages from one country to another, are exposed to a multitude of dangers; but, doubtless, when the sea roars, and † " the stormy wind lifts up the waves thereof," they are in an especial manner protected by the gracious Providence of the Almighty. For the benefit of their native land they brave the fury of the storm, encounter the perilous chances of unwholesome climates, and are often compelled to undergo the most severe distresses and privations. It is, therefore, our duty, and no one will deny that it is our interest, to remove every obstacle we can from their course, and by every preservative caution to direct them in safety, as far as we are able, through the trackless deep.

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* Ps. cvii. 23. † Ibid. cvii. 25.

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How well this duty is performed by those who undertake it, is not so generally known, as it ought to be. Having passed a great part of their lives in encountering the dangers of the deep, they devote the remainder of their days with a laudable zeal and an active benevolence to the promoting of some of the best interests of their country. In the execution of their office they have proved themselves deserving of the highest commendation, and in the services which they have rendered the nation, they have imposed upon it a debt of gratitude, which it can never adequately repay. But they, doubtless, look for a higher reward than any that man can bestow, even for the praise of Him, who has often providentially delivered them out of their distress, and who will not suffer their truly benevolent and disinterested labours to pass without a recompense at the Day of Judgment. In serving their country, they serve their God; and in performing acts of benefit to his creatures, they secure an interest in his mercy.

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But not only have these men promoted the welfare of their country by a faithful and conscientious discharge of their particular duties; they have also rendered it the most important services in the hour of national peril. When with base and unnatural perfidy, a perfidy most repugnant to every noble and generous feeling of the heart, our domestic foes entered into a league with our open enemy, and conspired together to betray into his hands the bulwarks of our safety, the brethren of this house, struck with abhorrence of so wicked an intent, and burning with true patriotic zeal, worthy of their characters as Britons and Christians, (to their immortal honour be it spoken!) hastened, at the risk of their lives, to avert the impending evil, and succeeded in preventing the execution of a purpose, that had for its object the destruction of every blessing we enjoy as a free and independent people.

At another time, when the enemy thirsting for the ruin of a people that stood between him and universal power, threatened to pour his numerous legions

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on our coasts, these same veteran patriots, grown old in the service of their country, but still possessing the noble spirit that animated their breasts in their younger days, voluntarily stood forward with God as a witness to their faith, and cheerfully bore an active and laborious part in the defence of their native home. It is in cases of emergency and in the hour of danger that true patriotism is discerned; that principles, which religion sanctions, and virtue admires, show their brightest splendour to the world. Instances, like these, of devotion to the public good are not of momentary nor transient benefit; they act as examples to our children, as incentives to future generations, as precedents of patriotic sacrifice, which others will feel a pride to follow, and an ambition to equal.

There is every reason to think, that these men will not again have opportunities, similar to those I have just mentioned, of proving how dearly they love the land that gave them birth, and how willing they are to make an offering of their ease, their health,

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and even their very lives for its protection and security. That malignant Spirit, which a disbelieving philosophy had excited in the breasts of many of our deluded countrymen, inflaming their passions with pictures of ideal good to be realized by unnatural conspiracies and sanguinary revolutions, and urging them to plunge the destructive sword into the bosom of their country, is now, we trust, dispossessed of his hold, and cast utterly out of the land. Never again, let us hope, will a mad ambition prepare to invade our shores, and menace our Zion with destruction. The day of fear is past, the arm of terror is broken. Providence has inspired wisdom, firmness, constancy into our councils; has caused the noble principles upon which we have acted, and in which we have persevered, to succeed and triumph, and has laid low in the dust that hateful tyranny which has so long raised storm and tempest among the nations, and poured floods of misery over the earth.

When we reflect on the innumerable sufferings which many neighbouring countries have undergone,

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on the painful sacrifices which they have been compelled to make, on the tremendous conflicts that have shaken the world with affright, on the rivers of blood that have flowed, like an inundation, around, and on the devouring flames which with the glare of lightning have reddened the expanse of Heaven, we cannot but acknowledge, that the judgments of the Almighty have been abroad for the punishment and reformation of mankind. And when we consider also how this nation has been graciously protected and preserved by the Providence of God during these awful visitations; how little, comparatively speaking, he has occasioned us to suffer, and how he has enabled us (for in Him alone is strength and success) to become, through patient perseverance in upright principles, the authors of deliverance to a subjugated world, we must be wanting in the best feelings of the heart, must be destitute of every emotion of true piety, not to attribute these blessings to his mercy, and not to cry out with holy gratitude, not unto us, O God, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praise.

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The observations I have now made relative to the Establishment which we are this day commending, tend, I trust, to illustrate its wisdom and its usefulness. It has been a means of prosperity to the country, of security to those who navigate the seas, and, through the patriotism of its members, of defence in the hour of national danger. But it has another claim upon our admiration. It is a work of Charity. Its ample revenue, after the necessary expences of its primary object are defrayed, is applied to the relief of decayed Seamen and their wives and children. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon that Establishment, which, in the true Christian Spirit, makes a comfortable provision for the latter days of those, whose best years have been employed, and strongest energies exerted, in the service of their country. These poor labourers in the vineyard of public usefulness should at least, when their strength is wasted, and their days are drawing to a close, be permitted, as a recompense for their toil, to partake of the fruits, which their industry has contributed to

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produce. When we see, that the debt of gratitude, which their services have merited, is acknowledged and discharged; when we behold the aged mariner, who has weathered many a storm, and undergone many a distress, laid up for the remainder of his days in a safe and quiet harbour, provided for him by the care of benevolence; and when we witness the kind solicitude, that imparts to thousands the means of comfort, and banishes from their minds the alarms of want, we cannot but rejoice both as Britons and as Christians, that such an Establishment exists amongst us, and put up a fervent prayer to Heaven, that it may descend unimpaired to posterity, and communicate its blessings to our children and to our children's children.

Raise your voices of discontent, ye sons of anarchy and rebellion; complain of the evils that infect the state; erect the crest of revolutionary adventure, and under the plausible and visionary plea of reformation, destroy the Government, the Laws, the Institutions of the land; and what will be the result? It will be this. You will not only, in your wild and furious

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spirit of innovation, give the death-blow to Liberty, but also plunge the sword, reeking with the blood of Virtue, into the bosom of Charity. Not a religious, not a benevolent Institution, will escape the dreadful wreck which your licentious violence will create. Even this Establishment will fall to the ground, and be no more a blessing to the land. Misery will be heard lamenting in our streets. The poor will either perish for want, or be hurried on by desperation to seek a sustenance in rapine and in blood. The veteran servant of his country will be driven from the shelter which he enjoys, and, instead of passing his last days in peace and comfort with his family, will pour fourth aloud the bitterness of his soul, and go down with sorrow to the grave. Beware, then, of fomenting a spirit of dissention in your native land by representations of unreal grievances, and of endangering the existence of all our civil, moral, and religious excellences by endeavours to bring authorities into disrepute, and to excite in the breasts of the people a desire for that perfection in Government, which it is not in the power of human

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wisdom to attain. Be satisfied with the superior blessings we enjoy, and be grateful to Providence for the distinguished favours with which he has been pleased to visit us above all other nations. Leave us our religion, as it is; we desire no change. Leave us our Laws, our Liberties, our Customs, as they have been transmitted to us by our Fathers; we wish no fanciful experiments to be made upon them. Leave us our beneficial Establishments, our charitable Institutions, as they now exist; we know the good they have done, the happiness they have imparted, and we are anxious that they should stand and flourish under their old fostering protection.

We love our country, as we love our lives. It is endeared to us by a thousand ties. It is the soil that gave us birth. It contains all that is dear and valuable to our hearts. It is adorned on all sides with monuments of wisdom, of greatness, of prosperity, of usefulness, of private benevolence, and of public charity;—and, if we are faithful subjects and good Christians, it opens to us infinite sources of

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rational enjoyment, and supplies us with innumerable means and opportunities of advancing the glory of God, and promoting the peace and comfort of our fellow-creatures. Long may it stand a blessing to ourselves and our posterity, the admiration of the world, and an example of all that is good, and wise, and great to the surrounding nations. Long too may this particular Establishment continue an ornament to the land, an evidence of political wisdom, and a memorial of Christian love. May that Providence, which has wrought such wonderful things in our behalf, and which loves to protect and uphold the faithful followers of Jesus, still extend his favour and mercy towards us, and make us active and zealous instruments to advance the best interests of our country, and to further his gracious designs upon earth. And God grant, that we may feel, as we ought, his abundant loving-kindness, and prove the sincerity of our gratitude, by repenting heartily of our sins, by believing vitally in Christ Jesus, and by keeping his holy will and commandments all the days of our life.

FINIS.

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